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SHOULD BIBLICAL HISTORY AND LITERATURE BE OFFERED FOR ADMISSION TO COLLEGE?

A SYMPOSIUM.

THE question proposed carries with it certain other questions of a very practical sort :

1. Will instruction in Biblical History and Literature be allowed in the public schools? The great majority of students who apply for admission to college have received a public-school training. It is very doubtful if this subject, as a distinct subject, could be introduced into the curriculum of the public schools without awakening the suspicion that it was done under the motive of religious propaganda.

2. Can instruction in Biblical History be given to students of the preparatory-school age? The historical setting of the different parts of Scripture is a matter of no little difficulty. A consensus of opinion at many points has been by no means established. But nothing could be accepted as a requirement for college which did not represent accuracy and thoroughness of method. The historical method must have a fair chance to prove itself, if it is to have a recognized academic value. The same difficulty would not apply equally to the study of the Bible as literature.

3. The moral question remains : Should the Bible be studied simply as history and literature? It is of course as immoral as it is irrational to make a fetish of the Bible. No sense of its sacredness should ever withdraw it from intellectual contact with the student at any stage of his training. But it is quite possible so to familiarize the mind at once with the Bible as history and literature that it may never mean anything more than history and literature. I should say at this point that everything would depend upon the teacher. Moral impressions would doubtless come chiefly from this source.

I do not see how questions of the sort to which I have referred

can be passed by; but, in so far as they can be answered in the affirmative, I should say yes to the main question. Given a school, public or private, which will allow biblical study, given a community sufficiently advanced to accept the reasonable results of historical criticism, and given a body of teachers competent for the task, and the offer of Biblical History and Literature may become a practical rather than a purely academic question. In that event the offer of the subject would tend to bring about the desired result. The subject itself would become a valuable addition to the subject-matter of academic training, and the study of it might, under right conditions, be made an intellectual aid to religion.

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1. The thoroughly fundamental nature of religion itself would seem to indicate that its highest historical and literary expression—the Bible—might reasonably find a place in the subjects offered for admission to college. Certainly an interest so many-sided, so persistent, and so deep-going as religion ought not to be without some adequate recognition in our courses of study.

2. The very fact that we are admittedly a Christian nation seems to demand that all ought to know, at least intelligently, the predominant religion of the nation. It can hardly seem other than an anomaly that there should be less intelligent instruction in the Christian religion in our courses of study than in many another.

3. If Biblical History and Literature are to be entirely omitted, there seems danger that by simple default the really most important historical development the world has seen should be quite ignored and its surpassing importance forgotten.

4. It is also worth remembering that as a people we have, as Dr. Munger has pointed out, three great inheritances from the past—Greek, Roman, and Jewish; and the latter influence is even more important than the two former. The Greek and Roman are recognized in education; it would seem that the other should be.

5. From considerable experience in such teaching in college, I am thoroughly convinced that there is no real difficulty in

making Bible study, not only interesting, but intellectually of thorough profit. Indeed, I think it can be so taught as to be singularly quickening to the whole mental life.

For these reasons, I do not see why the subject of Biblical History and Literature might not be most appropriately offered as one of the subjects for admission to college, though the bringing in of the subject no doubt would have to be somewhat gradual, for lack of teachers who can do the work most efficiently.

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For the following reasons I do not favor allowing Biblical History and Literature a place as a college-entrance subject:

1. It is not the business of the college to examine an applicant for entrance on all his previous knowledge acquired in the school, church, and home, or even on all his school studies, but solely on those things which are necessary to test his fitness to go on with his college studies. Unless we take this position, a simple program of studies in the courses preparatory to college soon becomes unattainable, and without a simple program of a few central studies amply taught there is no good education at any stage.

2. The best test of literary *power* in English—a power well secured by familiarity with the matchless English of the Bible—is an examination on the student's ability to write a short piece of good English. This can be secured without examining on the Bible. Examinations designed to test literary *information* by setting questions on the contents of English books—the Bible included—cannot be depended on as evidence of real literary knowledge and, least of all, as evidence of literary power.

3. There is little value in examining on Biblical History for entrance to college, just as there is little value in examining on American history. Every boy and girl should know both from their early years, whether they go or do not go to college. They should also know how to spell, read, write, and cipher. They should also know something about geography and human physiology. These are elementary things for all young Americans.

But the things of elementary education, invaluable as they are, are not the things for college-entrance tests. English is the one exception—and yet not a real exception, because an ever advancing mastery of English is a prime daily necessity all the way through college.

4. An examination in Biblical History is apt to raise in an unwise way endless questions of the rights of conscience. Does the examiner set questions on the basis that the Bible is history, or history mixed with fable? Does he believe the Bible is true? Does he believe in God and also in Christ? If he does not, then, if he is consistent, his questions will show it. If for any reasons he does not feel free to set questions which in any way touch these vital things, he is avoiding the central meaning of the Bible, and is thus rendering it unintelligible and useless in respect to its most important teachings.

5. There is a place for Biblical History and Literature. That place is, first of all, the home; next, the church; and, next to that, the period of schooling before college. But the place of the Bible in all these relations is primarily its place as the book of our religion and morals, and secondarily as a book of history and literature. If its truths are not taught early, they are not taught when they are most effective. Do we need an old pagan to teach us again the great lesson: *nunc adhibe puro pectore verba puer?* Augustine had been carefully trained in the Bible "from a child" by a wise and holy mother. It was not his Biblical Literature and History, however, that saved him in his wanderings, but, as he tells us, "the echo of the name of Christ." The loss of power over the lives of men is the really deplorable thing revealed by the growing ignorance of college students in regard to the Bible as literature and history. It will not be cured or helped to any marked degree by examining on Biblical Literature and History for entrance to college. It must be cured at the source, and that source is the home.

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Any subject of study, suitable to the age of students in a secondary school, which has cultural value in itself, and which

is directly related to college studies, is proper as an admission subject. Biblical History and Literature, when adequately treated, conform to these conditions.

Knowledge of the history and literature of the Bible is especially valuable on account of its manifold implications. English literature is saturated with the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. It is not only that such poems as Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and such allegories as the *Pilgrim's Progress*, are themselves directly developed from the Bible; it is also true that through the centuries we find prose and poetry—epic, lyric, essay, history, philosophy, oratory—replete with biblical allusion. One cannot freely comprehend and thoroughly enjoy the literature of our tongue without familiarity with the Bible.

The history of Europe and America, too, is so interwoven with biblical religion as to be incomprehensible to one who does not know the Scriptures. Mediæval art, the Christian motive of crusade and of Spanish and Portuguese discovery, the religious strife of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the settlement of the English colonies in America, the development of the life of our republic—all these are full of the ideas of the Bible. To understand history and art and literature, one must be familiar with the books of the Old and the New Testaments.

Again, at the basis of modern society we find the Christian religion. The Christian church in all its forms is active everywhere as a social force. No moral problem concerning society can be dealt with unless the church is taken into the account. The great teacher of ethics is the church. The great social organizer is the church. The great uplifting, spiritual, and æsthetic influence of all civilized lands is the church. Broaden the conception of the church so as to include the synagogue, and yet it remains true that the church is explicable only by the Bible.

The English Bible is itself a superb specimen of pure English. One who is thoroughly familiar with its simple, nervous, incisive diction has at hand a tool which should tend to give him also command of a style than which there is none better. When Louis Kossuth visited this country, brought from a Turkish prison

on an American warship as guest of the nation, he surprised and charmed his audience by the eloquence of his English speech. It is said that he learned his English in prison from two books—Shakespeare and the Bible. Either is a worthy school-book for an American boy or girl.

But Bible teaching in the schools should be as thorough as the teaching of Latin or chemistry. The old-fashioned Sunday-school methods dabbled in Scripture study with a species of benevolent imbecility which is in part responsible for the present neglect of both Old Testament and New. Such methods may well be relegated to the dust-heap. The Bible should not follow them.

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There are two reasons why any subject should be offered for admission to college: first, that the study of it offers opportunity for a normal intellectual growth and development; and, second, that it furnishes a suitable preparation for the further study of the same subject in college, or for such new subjects as may be provided. The number of subjects offered must be limited by the time at disposal and the teaching force. Whether any subject not now offered may be included in the list would depend upon its merits and upon the ability of the school to teach it.

In the light of these statements, what can be said concerning biblical history and literature?

There can be no doubt that it furnishes the desired intellectual awakening and growth. When revivals of Bible study have occurred, such results have been manifest even when the subject was not taught systematically or in accordance with the methods of a sound pedagogy. If we may assume that the Bible will be as well taught as other history and literature, we may safely conclude that its study would be followed by satisfactory results.

If we may separate the idea of history from that of literature, we may say that Bible history is quite as important as other history, provided we desire a preparation for a broad and true view of the world's progress. The movements described in the Bible

are different from, but not less important than, the movements described in Roman or Grecian history. Religious prejudice should not obscure the teacher in his effort to give a truthful account of the world's life.

From the standpoint of literature, the Bible furnishes the key to a full appreciation of the beauty of much of the best literature in the English language. There is no good reason why a student should be denied the privilege of laying an adequate foundation for the study of either history or literature. To rule the biblical history or literature out is to be guilty of a narrowness or sectarianism of which we have too much already.

Whether the secondary school can make provision for another subject is a purely local question. In some schools it could be done easily; in others, probably not at all. This condition does not prove that the subject should be ignored either by the secondary schools or by the college.

The tendency among colleges at present is to require a given amount of training in history as a condition for entrance, but to leave the school with an option as to the history it will teach. General history, United States history, Roman history, and Grecian history are all listed as acceptable subjects. In my judgment, there is no good reason why the history and literature as contained in the Bible might not be put on the same basis as the others. Rome, Greece, and Europe have contributed to the world's history and civilization. This is equally true of biblical history. The objections to offering Bible history and literature as a subject in preparation for college are, chiefly, that teachers are not prepared to teach the Bible, that the Bible has not been put into pedagogical form, and that there are prejudices against it from religious or non-religious motives. The first of these objections can be removed, the second ought to be, and the third, while a striking commentary on conditions in civilization, is no reason why education should suffer.

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